SCHOOL OF PRAYER

ШКОЛА МОЛІТВА

INTRODUCTION TO PRAYER

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Chapter II

Specific Advice on Prayer

* TITLES WILL NOT MATCH CHAPTER I TABLE OF CONTENTS 100%

TEN PIECES OF ADVICE
ON HOW TO PRAY CORRECTLY

1. We can encounter God in prayer.

2. Every prayer is unique and unrepeatable.
   For example, when reading Psalm 50, today one thing
   may strike us, and tomorrow—another.

3. In prayer, when we encounter the Lord,
   we come to know what is truly good.

4. It is important before prayer to find time to become quiet and to become aware of God's presence, to become aware of who I am and before Whom I stand, and not to begin praying immediately. Inattention during prayer flows from our lack of awareness of the One before Whom we stand.

5. It is important to enter into the meaning of the prayers we recite, for they were not written at a desk. These are not the work of scholars, but the experience of saints—what they lived through and passed on in words as their experience of God. Therefore it is important to read attentively the

words of the prayer.

6. In prayers we say many words, but often do not believe them, because they are not in harmony with the feeling we have within ourselves. Therefore it is important to take those prayers which we *want* to say to God, for He does not need them—we need them.

7. Our prayer should flow into our life. And when we cannot find the right decision, we should return to prayer. These are interconnected.

8. Throughout the day we must have moments when we return to God, when we renew our relationship with Him.

9. It is difficult for us to glorify God when something difficult happens, yet we must learn to see God in everything that happens. Then every moment will be glorified.

10. When you have encountered God in prayer, you cannot pass Him by, for He is in people, in their needs. And perhaps through my prayer and yours, the Lord can help not only us, but many people.

HOW TO MAINTAIN PRAYER WITHIN ONESELF

Prayer is an important matter in the Christian life. If a person prays, it means that he or she is spiritually alive; and if one does not pray, then one is spiritually dead. If a parish prays, it is alive; if a parish does not pray, it is dead.

Merely uttering the words of prayers is not yet prayer. A sign of good prayer is that in our heart we have reverent feelings toward God, a great desire to do God's will, a stable sense of interior joy, deep repentance, acceptance of ourselves and of the circumstances of life. Therefore all our efforts must be directed toward ensuring that during prayer all of this fills us.

When our whole person, our whole being, above all desires God, then all our prayers—both communal and personal—are truly prayer; and when this is absent, then it is still not prayer. Prayer, as the striving of our heart toward God, must be constantly strengthened and the prayerful spirit nurtured within ourselves.

First of all, these are the established traditional prayers, when we recite them or listen to them. We need only to read or listen to these prayers very attentively, and this will inevitably lead us to an awareness of God's presence and will bring us into a prayerful state. In the prayers contained in prayer books and in various liturgical books, we "touch" the experience of God that the Holy Fathers knew and lived. Therefore, when we attentively and consciously recite these prayers, we ourselves join this experience of God. In order for our prayer to be truly an encounter

with the Lord, it is necessary to co-experience everything that is present in the prayers.

The three simplest things needed for successful prayer:

1. Let us not begin prayer without preparation and an awareness of the One to whom we will be speaking.

2. Let us not recite prayers carelessly or hurriedly, but let us be attentive and focused.

3. After finishing the prayer, let us remain for some time in silence and in God's presence; let us not hurry immediately to our daily duties.

Preparation for Prayer

When we have the desire to pray, we must first step away from daily worries; therefore, it is good to stand or sit in silence in order to calm and quiet ourselves. Then reflect on who you are and to Whom you intend to address these words of prayer. Become aware of your sinfulness and weakness, and of the greatness and omnipotence of God—who you are, and before Whom you stand. Our disposition before prayer is the foundation of good prayer.

Prayer

It is most important first of all to have a stable prayer rule that we are always able to fulfill. In our free time, we should read attentively the words of the prayers we recite. We should live through—"chew over"—these words; then, when we recite them according to our prayer rule, these thoughts and experiences will come alive within us.

When we begin our prayer, let us stand before an icon, make the Sign of the Cross without haste, and begin our prayer. Let us speak without rushing, consciously, each word. When we say that the Lord is "everywhere present," let us become aware that He stands behind every event. When we speak of sinfulness, let us understand our own sinfulness and desire transformation. When addressing God as "Our Father," let us remember that each of us is a child of God, and that all who pray this prayer and likewise call God "Father" are our sisters and brothers.

If during prayer distraction arises, it is a sign that we are generally scattered in life—that we always lack attention. Only the time of prayer reveals to us that we have not learned to concentrate. Therefore, when distraction returns, let us strive above all to preserve awareness and focus on the words we are saying. No matter how much distraction there is, again and again let us refocus on the words of the prayer. Let us strive that every word of the prayer be spoken with understanding and with the

experience of what is being said in its words. Only in this way will we teach ourselves to pray.

If during prayer some sentence or even a single word touches us, let us stop. Let us pay attention to the feelings and experiences that came from these words of prayer. Let us fill ourselves with this experience which the Lord has given. Remain in this state as long as these emotions persist. This is a good sign that the spirit of prayer is beginning to develop within us. The more such experiences we have, the more we will grow in the state of prayer—ultimately, in the Lord.

Completion of Prayer

When we finish our prayer, let us not rush immediately to our various obligations. Let us stand or sit for a time and become aware of what the Lord has allowed us to experience and what He wishes to say through it. Let us especially reflect on what spoke to us most strongly.

A sign that the prayer was good is that we do not really want to rush right away to our tasks after it.

When we are filled with God in prayer—in human terms, when we actualize ourselves in the Lord—we do not want to return to actualizing ourselves in the world. When you have filled yourself with the Lord, you have little desire to fill yourself with anything else. Therefore, it is essential to experience the joy of prayer, for this is how our prayerful spirit is formed.

Every prayer leaves a gracious trace and imprint upon the soul of a person. When we are constant and patient in prayer, these traces and imprints increase. Then the person is changed and transfigured.

Of course, we must first acquire experience: through established prayers, we learn with our mind and heart to turn to God. Yet we must come to the point

of being able to speak to the Lord exactly what is on our heart and what we ourselves wish to say to Him. Our goal is to reach the point where our soul itself begins to speak prayerfully to God, to desire Him, and to open to the Lord what is within it and what it longs for.

However, a person must first gain the experience of praying with the prayer book, for this is the experience of communion with God lived by various persons. By touching their experience, we too can develop similar feelings and experiences. It is important on the basis of their experience later to gain our own.

IS PRAYER A VALUE FOR US?

If prayer is a value for us, then we must pray regularly. Believe me, the time spent in prayer is not wasted time. The saints did many good works in their lives. The fruits of their activity are still felt today. What was the secret of their success? The fact that they always found time for prayer. When we want to accomplish something important during the day, we should spend part of that time—even several hours—in prayer. Thus, if we value prayer, we are obliged to have a regular prayer life.

If prayer is a value for us, we must continually enrich our prayer life. In other words, we must grow in prayer and deepen our relationship with God. It is important for each of us to expand and diversify our prayers. We cannot constantly pray with the same words, because this will reduce prayer to mere formality. With our tongue we will speak words that do not come from the heart. But God desires deep communion with us. For this reason, we must work so that our prayers are not merely formulaic.

Therefore:

1. It is beneficial to pray using various types of prayer: praise, thanksgiving, intercession, petition, and so on.

2. It is worthwhile to try increasing the amount of time we dedicate to prayer.

3. One may pray using a prayer list, where we write down ahead of time what we would like to say to the Lord or for whom we would like to pray.

4. One may pray using quotations from Sacred Scripture or from the Holy Fathers. This will help us broaden our vocabulary and make our prayers more structured and meaningful.

5. One may try night prayers.

6. It is good to be able to pray in any situation in one's spirit: when riding in public transport, standing in line for groceries, before and after an exam, before making an important decision... In this way, the enrichment and diversification of our prayer life is a practical expression that we truly understand the value of prayer.

If prayer is a value for us, then we must learn to "pray correctly." Correct prayer is characterized by reverence toward God. Many people pray as though God were indebted to them and obligated to give what they ask for. They place ultimatums before Him such as: "If You do not answer me, I will leave the Church," or "If You do not answer me, I will stop believing in You." Does a human being have any right to say such things to God? When we come to prayer, we must understand to Whom we are praying! We come before the Lord and Creator of the universe. He deserves the greatest honor and worship.

Correct prayer is also characterized by persistence. Scripture tells of Jacob's struggle with someone mysterious who refused to reveal His name, but Jacob did not let Him go until he received a blessing from Him (see Gen. 32:23–33).

At times, in our concrete situations, if we do not see immediate results, the temptation arises to stop praying, to let our hands fall. But we should not give up so quickly. Perseverance and the struggle of prayer are absolutely necessary for life with God. Therefore, let us not lower the hands we have raised in prayer, but let us wait in humility for God's answer. The ultimate goal of prayer is not to obtain what we want, but to learn to desire what God gives. Yet this will never happen unless we subordinate our will to His and entrust ourselves into God's hands. Jesus teaches that our prayer should be focused on those things that are according to the will of God.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO PRAY CONSTANTLY?

To remain in a prayerful spirit means always turning our thoughts and experiences toward God—thoughts and remembrance that the Lord is everywhere and at all times present, that He sees everything and watches over all. It means constantly having feelings directed toward the Lord, especially love and fear of God, which ultimately means reverence. It means having the desire always to know and to fulfill God's will, and to accept everything that happens as something in which the Lord stands behind it. Whatever we do, we should always carry these thoughts, feelings, and experiences in our heart.

Of course, we are always doing one thing or another, and as we turn to various tasks—and especially when we become absorbed in them—our thought of God becomes scattered. Therefore a certain skill and experience are needed so as not to forget God while carrying out our tasks.

Thus, above all, we must cultivate our thoughts and feelings about God. When these are present, this itself is continual inner prayer, for we always remember God.

Morning prayer is necessary precisely so that we can enter into awareness and the presence of God, and then remain in these thoughts and feelings throughout the whole day. The most important thing is to encounter God's presence from the very morning and to carry this awareness of His presence the whole day.

When various events occur and draw our attention away from God, we must return to our thoughts and feelings about God, which help us to remain in His presence. It is especially important to have short prayers and to repeat them, so that we may again return to the presence of God. This may be any short prayer that speaks to us and is close to our spirit; the most universal is: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner!", in which we acknowledge who our God is—our Lord and Savior—and who we are: those who need His help and salvation.

St. Basil the Great pointed out that the apostles were able to pray constantly because, whatever they did, they always remembered the Lord and His presence. This inner disposition was for them continual prayer.

The first Christians likewise repeated short prayers in order to remain constantly in God's presence and to repel various distracting thoughts. These short prayers were very diverse. St. Cassian said that in Egypt they prayed: "O Lord, come to my aid; all my hope is in You." St. Joannicius constantly repeated: "My hope is the Father, my refuge is the Son, my protection is the Holy Spirit. O Holy Trinity, our God, glory to You." Others prayed: "As a human being I have sinned; as a merciful Lord, forgive me." Without doubt, many other prayers existed. But over time the most widely used became the "Jesus Prayer": "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Its purpose, like that of other short prayers, is to focus our memory and attention on the Lord, for in long prayers our attention is quickly scattered. This prayer is very simple: stand with your attention in the heart before God's presence, and continually call upon Him: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a

sinner!" According to the persistence with which a person prays, the Lord grants spiritual prayer, which is itself a gift from God.

For beginners, it is important to pray with prepared prayers so that they may absorb and become deeply permeated with the thoughts and feelings contained in these prayers. This is necessary in order, to some extent, to change one's "godless" mentality and to acquire the way of thinking of a believing person. When our consciousness has already been somewhat transformed, then we may begin to try praying in our own words. Ultimately, those words will no longer truly be "ours," but words shaped and nurtured by our prayers.

WHAT HELPS DEVELOP PRAYER?

Prayerful meditation on the Lord

This is reflection on God's boundless love, on the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, on the Gospel, on the holy mysteries, on the Kingdom of Heaven, and so forth. Such meditation inevitably fills our soul with reverent feeling and directs the whole person toward God. We must lift our soul to the Lord. Therefore, it is important to have time—whether separately or before or after prayer—to begin reflecting on the great divine realities. One must simply reserve time for this, as well as have desire, consistency, and patience. This will inevitably lead to something touching us interiorly.

For example, let us try to meditate on the words proclaimed by the priest at the beginning of the Divine Liturgy: "Blessed is the Kingdom...." Then we will become aware that even here on earth the beginning of the Kingdom of Heaven is already present. At every moment of our life, we may become partakers of it—or not. Everything ultimately depends on us. Every moment of life is unique and unrepeatable. We are either drawing nearer to the Lord and His Kingdom or distancing ourselves.

Doing everything for the glory of God

Every life situation can either draw us closer to God or farther from Him. Therefore, we must ask God to grant us understanding of what and how we should act. We constantly have things to do; thus, when we turn to God in prayer, this teaches us always to direct our prayerful gaze toward the Lord. In this way, we learn to turn to Him more frequently throughout the day.

For example, if in the morning we reflect attentively on divine matters, then throughout the whole day we will return to those thoughts and experiences we

had. These thoughts and experiences will then prompt us to do everything for God's glory.

Frequently turning to the Lord with short prayers

We always have something to do throughout the day. It is important to turn to God. When we begin something, it is good to say: "Lord, bless what I am about to do." When we finish a task, it is important to say: "Glory to You, O Lord, for what I was able to accomplish." When a temptation comes: "Lord, save and protect me, for I cannot manage on my own." When we do not know what decision to make, let us pray: "Lord, enlighten my mind and teach me what I must do."

Or we may simply repeat: "Lord, have mercy," "Most Holy Mother of God, save me," "Holy Angel of God, my guardian, pray to God for me, a sinner." We may speak in any short phrases taken from Sacred Scripture, from the Psalms, from the liturgical books, or even compose them ourselves.

The main thing is that they come from the heart and are spoken consciously. When we do this, we acquire the habit of constantly turning to the Lord and remaining with Him.

If we do everything for the glory of God and frequently turn to Him, this will in turn lead to the birth of short prayers in our soul. All of this—meditating on God, acting for God's glory, and frequent prayerful appeals—moves us to deepen our life of prayer. Whoever practices this will learn to remain in God's presence, which is ultimately the desire of the human soul, created in the image and likeness of God.

PAYING ATTENTION TO THE WORDS OF PRAYER

We pray in church, we pray at home... We know many prayers... We often say them without even being aware of what we are saying. Perhaps, at the beginning, when we first learned these prayers, we understood them; but later, after constant repetition, we lost the awareness of what we are saying. Therefore, an extremely important element in prayer is "chewing through," that is, consciously taking in every word.

Let us look at the prayer "Our Father," which we repeat most frequently, and which Jesus Christ Himself taught us. In it, we call God our Father. When we truly realize that God is our Father and we are His children, we also understand that the person who may be unpleasant to us also calls Him Father. Thus, we have one Father, and we are brothers and sisters.

Another example is the prayer "O Heavenly King." We say that He is everywhere present and fills all things. When we have truly realized that God is everywhere, fear, anxiety, and panic disappear from our life.

And one could go on endlessly. Every word in prayer says something to us, because prayer is the experience of God handed down to us by other persons. Therefore, it is very important to enter into a prayerful state so that prayer speaks to us, rather than being a mechanical recitation.

Let us try to reflect on the words of our prayers. Perhaps we do not need to pray many prayers, but only the "Our Father," reflecting on each word. In the morning, one may pray "Hail, Mother of God" ("Богородице Діво"), likewise reflecting on every word. And we will see how these prayers will begin to

change us, to make us different, when we are conscious of what we are saying in these prayers.

DO WE NEED A PRAYER RULE?

The desire for spontaneous prayer rarely comes in our life. Of course, there are exceptions. For example, in the life of St. Francis it is said that when he heard the name of Jesus, he immediately began to pray. But, unfortunately, this is not how it usually happens in our life. Thus, it is important to have balance between spontaneous prayer and a prayer rule.

Of course, it does not bring joy to God if we recite our prayer rule mechanically, thinking that by doing so God will give us what we need. Yet in Christian life we often speak about asceticism. Therefore, when we speak of prayer, constancy and perseverance are important.

Prayer is the experience of God—a cry of the soul. Therefore, when we speak about prayer, it is important to find time to reflect on the prayers, to enter into the spirit of the saints who composed them.

It is important that our prayer rule be proportionate to our available time. Perhaps it is not enough to pray only in the morning and evening. I know some people who pray every hour. Living in a material world, we must find time for God to transform us.

We must also remember that the quantity is less important than the quality. What matters is that these prayers be conscious.

Prayer is a lifeline that can help us swim through the whole of this difficult life.

A PRAYER RULE "DISCIPLINES"

Relationships between people must be natural—this is said often in the modern world—and we often say that with God there must be naturalness and sincerity. The human soul does not find rest until it knows God; for this reason, prayer should be a natural desire for God, our genuine need, something we seek. But experience shows us something quite different: namely, that the desire to pray rarely comes on its own. It is very rare that we would want simply to get up and pray spontaneously. St. Francis had such a desire—whenever he heard the word "Jesus," he felt sudden joy because he had heard the name of the Savior. This was his spontaneous and natural feeling. But do we have such a joyful desire to pray? For this reason, there must be a certain balance between the impulse to pray and a personal prayer rule, which every person should have.

Of course, we must understand that these personal rules do not give God joy or merit if we fulfill them mechanically or with the expectation that by fulfilling them the Lord will reward us: that if we recite a certain number of prayers in a mechanical way, then God will give us what we need.

Why is a prayer rule necessary? One of the important elements of Christian life is asceticism. The word "ascetic," coming from the Greek language, has the same root as the word "athlete." An athlete is one who constantly trains in something. Similarly, constancy is important in Christian life. Spontaneity as well, but our spontaneity can be built only upon a stable foundation of prayer. The prayers we recite, of course, were not the result of desk-bound reflection by this or that saint. The saints did not sit at a table to write some new prayer. Prayers appeared as a result of long struggles, searching, and the experience of God. And all this they have handed down to us. For their struggle consisted in making life by prayer the gradual beginning of life in Heaven. A Christian never rests content with the idea that someday, somewhere, he will become a

partaker of the Kingdom of Heaven—he wants already here to begin to live by that Kingdom.

Christians spend a large part of their time in the temple. The temple consists of two places: the large temple—the church—and the small temple—one's own home. In both places, a person should dedicate time to God. Then the rest of time—the time of duties and worldly cares—will not so quickly overwhelm someone who often remains with God, whether in the great temple or in the small.

In moral life, every good deed is a step toward perfection. A person does not become holy in one moment—he is transformed gradually. Every prayer and every act of prayer testifies to a desire to pray. Therefore, this duty of personal prayer must belong to everyone. For stable prayer, this steady spiritual labor, is the staircase of prayerful experience which we draw from prayer.

The world inevitably influences each of us. Because of this we have formed worldviews, mentalities, and certain ways of thinking. Therefore conflicts and misunderstandings arise between us precisely because of these differences. But when we unite ourselves with God in prayer, our long-formed views change. When we meet the Lord in prayer, we acquire thoughts pleasing to God. A person becomes like the one with whom he associates. Therefore prayer gives us the experience of God, and in God we possess everything. In the Eastern understanding, a theologian is not someone who has finished master's or doctoral studies—a theologian is one who prays. For he is with God. Thus every person is called to be a theologian, to have an experience of God.

The problem is not in having a large prayer rule, for it is not important to collect as many prayers as possible. Just as there are physically stronger and weaker people, so too personal prayer practices vary. Therefore we must not set

rules beyond human strength, for a person may take on an unrealistic amount of prayer, fulfill it for a certain time, and then fall into discouragement, no longer wanting to pray at all. At the same time, a personal prayer rule may become the lifeline by which we reach the end of our life. Of course, when necessary, that rule may be increased. But in prayer life the greatest value is not quantity, but quality. Therefore it is quite important in our free time to think through, reflect upon, and meditate on our usual prayers—both personal and communal. And then the feelings that arise in us during reflection will return when we pray personally or communally in church.

Sometimes the question arises: how can we pray with someone else's prayers? If prayer is the meeting of two persons, how are we to speak with prepared texts? Is not prayer an encounter? But the saints who composed prayers give us their experience of God—so that by using these prayers we might immerse ourselves in their experience, becoming, in a certain measure, partakers of their experience of God. And then, having acquired their experience, having learned to speak with God in their language, we begin to learn and acquire experience of our own. It is like learning a foreign language: at first you memorize certain phrases, say them mechanically, simply repeating someone else's expressions once, twice, ten times... Only later do you begin forming your own combinations. In the same way, by using the prayers of those who experienced the Lord, we learn to speak with God in the same language—not in emotional terms or at the level of mere feelings, but in the language of the Spirit.

If we learn to pray, then each of our prayers will be an encounter with God and an opportunity for us to grow and be transformed. After every prayer we will come away transfigured. Every prayer will give birth to us more and more into life in God. Every prayer will become for us a joy-filled meeting with the Lord.

THE PRAYER RULE

A person must learn everything in life, including prayer. To remain in a prayerful state, it is not enough merely to read certain prayers; rather, it is important:

1. Never to hurry in prayer, but instead to speak all these prayers as though slightly singing them. We see that in communal prayers we read very little; we mostly sing or chant.

2. To get rid of the desire to read hastily in prayer in order to finish a certain number of prayers, and instead to dedicate a fixed amount of time to prayer—say, 15 or 30 minutes. Then do not worry about how many prayers you manage to read, because you have set aside the time for it. If you have the desire to pray longer, then you should do so.

3. Do not look at the clock; begin prayer without thinking about time. Then the thought will not arise, "How many prayers do I still have left to read?" or "How much longer must I pray?"

4. It is very important to pray in the morning and in the evening, but it is also necessary to find opportunities for prayer throughout the day.

5. Be conscious of the words you speak and try to experience the feelings expressed in the prayer.

6. In free time it is important to reread—and especially to reflect upon—the prayers we pray. For these prayers are the cry of the soul and the

experience of God of various persons. By reflecting on these prayers, we too become participants in their experience.

7. It is important not only to read these prayers one after another, but to insert your own personal prayer between them.

8. If certain words from the prayers speak to us in a particular way, then we should stop reading and remain longer with the thoughts and feelings that the Lord has given us.

9. If it happens that you do not have enough time for prayer, it is better to shorten your prayer rule, but never to fulfill it hastily.

10. Address God not casually but always with reverence. Ultimately He does not need our prayers or even our bows. A short but conscious prayer—this is what unites us with the Lord, and this we can do at any moment.

11. One may take a prayer rule directly from the prayer book, or one may compose it oneself from various prayers. However, the less we depend on the book, the better. It is good to know certain prayers or psalms by heart and recite them even while working. This becomes an opportunity for our conversation with the Lord. The prayer rule exists so that we may meet and unite with the Lord, not so that we may fulfill it slavishly.

12. At any cost we must avoid formality and mechanical prayer. It must always be conscious, not careless. Better less but with quality, than much but formal. With the prayer rule we must be flexible masters of the rule,

not its slaves. We are to be slaves only of the Lord, who has given us every moment of life.

13. The prayer rule is a safe enclosure for prayer. Prayer is the inner reality, and the prayer rule is the outer structure. Just as a person without a body is not a person, so prayer without a prayer rule is not prayer. Both are necessary for a person. Therefore, one must have this law for oneself: internally, always and at all times to pray and remain with God. For the prayer rule there must be a designated time, place, and measure. However, how long to remain in prayer, where to pray, and which prayers to use—each person must determine for himself, deciding whether to increase or decrease the rule, or change its place and time. The most important thing is always to remember God and to stand before Him.

PRAYER, WORK, REST...

What should we do when a problem, difficulty, or crisis arises? The word *crisis* comes from Greek. It has several meanings, one of which is *judgment*. What is judgment? We lived in a certain way up until this point, we had a stable situation, but then certain changes or events occur, circumstances shift, and suddenly it is as though a judgment is being passed upon the situation. Judgment places us, to some extent, before the circumstances in which we must give an account for how we have lived up to now and for what led us to this problem. It is, in a sense, a judgment over our previous life and actions. And when we speak of Christian life, we indeed quite often mention various crises in society and in the Church. Many of these crises are diverse and independent of us. Yet, if we face the truth, we must admit that the crisis—the judgment in which we find ourselves—was often permitted by us. The Ukrainian proverb

says it well: “You make your bed, you must lie in it.” As we have prepared it, so we experience the crisis. Much depends on us; it did not arise out of nowhere.

I will not analyze the topic of crisis more deeply, but closely connected to this issue is the question of the harmonious integration of prayer, work, and rest. Already St. Anthony the Great, regarded as the father of monasticism, attempted to harmonize these three elements: prayer, work, and rest. Rather, it was not he himself, but an angel who appeared and taught him how to do this; however, Anthony gave primacy to prayer, for in prayer and through prayer a Christian can come to know what is truly good for him, what God’s will is in his life. A person can discover what the Lord requires and expects of him at that particular moment, in that particular period of life.

If we look closely at our life, we will see that very often we ourselves disturb this harmony. We allow those difficult periods—those we call crises—to enter our life. Since our prayer life is neglected, the darkening of the human person that resulted from original sin returns. When we are darkened, we make unwise steps, choose wrongly, or commit unworthy actions. Therefore, when the next crisis comes, we can be certain that prayer had been neglected—both communal and personal.

THE "JESUS PRAYER"

The prayer we know as the Jesus Prayer, or the Prayer of Unceasing Prayer, received its final, defined form in the 13th–14th centuries. It consists of several elements. Its main essence lies in turning to Jesus Christ through a short prayer formula, which is an act of faith and includes a petition for mercy. It is expressed as follows: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." While repeating it, one becomes aware of the constant presence of God. It is also linked with maintaining inner watchfulness and attention, and sometimes with specific techniques.

The Jesus Prayer arose from the words of the Holy Gospel: "One must pray always and not lose heart." These words of Christ stirred the hearts of many Christians, and no one claimed that this command was excessive or unrealistic. There were simply different opinions on how it might be fulfilled.

Some authors, such as Origen or St. Augustine, taught that this command of Christ is fulfilled when certain prayers are recited regularly at fixed times of the day. Such a practice leads to the formation of a "prayerful state," thanks to which attention remains continually directed toward God. When we pray at designated hours, prayer in some measure carries on and is expressed beyond those hours through the performance of good works.

Some ascetics understood Christ's command more literally—to pray constantly by increasing the number of repetitions of prayer. An example of this is the monks of the Monastery of the "Sleepless Ones" (*Akoimetoi*) in Constantinople. They maintained continual prayer in the church. Several groups of monks prayed in succession, one group taking over as another finished, such that prayer continued day and night without interruption. (A

similar principle exists in "perpetual adoration" or the "perpetual rosary" known in the Western tradition.) As we see, however, this did not provide a solution on the personal level.

Those who desired most literally to fulfill this command were the ascetics who lived on the border between Syria and Asia Minor in the second half of the 4th century. In order to fulfill Christ's command, they rejected work and any worldly activities, societal or familial life. They dedicated their entire lives solely to prayer. They became known as the *Messalians*, which in the Syriac language means "people of prayer." But they were criticized by the Church—not because they dedicated themselves to prayer, but because they claimed prayer's supremacy over all else. Good works and acts of mercy were of no value for them, nor did they give importance to the holy mysteries or divine grace. In them, the danger of sentimentalism was observed, for they considered inner emotional experiences accompanying prayer to be of greatest importance.

St. Basil the Great opposed the views of the Messalians. He taught that the biblical understanding of unceasing prayer cannot be interpreted in terms of the number of prayers recited or the length of time dedicated to prayer. The command is rather an exhortation to attain a certain *state of prayer*, understood as continuous spiritual practice. It is a manner of experiencing God's presence that allows a person to direct all thoughts, words, and deeds toward the Lord, as well as prayer itself.

THE JESUS PRAYER – THE ENTIRE ESSENCE OF THE GOSPEL

"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner" – this prayer, in its spirit, is entirely evangelical, and in condensed form it expresses the whole essence of the Gospel. Therefore, it can be prayed by those who are members of

the Church and who carry within themselves this evangelical spirit. What is essential is to be conscious of the reality of the Gospel—the Good News in the person of Jesus Christ.

When we analyze the first part of the prayer, we see how it conveys our faith in the Lord: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God." At the very center of the prayer stands the name of Jesus, before whom "every knee shall bow" (cf. Is. 45:23). And when we pronounce these words, we affirm the event of the Incarnation. We profess that God, the Word of God, consubstantial with the Father, became man, and that in His person the fullness of divinity dwelt among us bodily.

To be prepared to recognize in Jesus Christ the incarnate Word of God—the very God who became man—we must be filled with the Holy Spirit. We call Him the Christ, and in doing so we affirm that in Him all Old Testament prophecies have been fulfilled. In confessing Him as the Christ, we acknowledge that the entire history of the Old and New Testaments is ours. We call Him the Son of God because we know that the Messiah awaited by the Jews—whom Bartimaeus called the Son of David (cf. Mk. 10:46–52)—is the incarnate Son of God. In these words lies everything we believe about Jesus Christ, everything drawn from the Old and New Testaments and from the centuries-long experience of the Church. In these short words, we express a complete confession of faith. It is one of the shortest "creeds" in the Church.

Yet it is not enough merely to profess our faith; it is not enough simply to believe. Even the demons "believe—and tremble" (cf. Jas. 2:19). Faith alone is not sufficient for salvation. It must lead us to a right relationship with the Lord. Therefore, having fully, clearly, and explicitly professed our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord—our faith in His historic reality and His divinity—we place ourselves consciously before Him, face to face, and we say: "Have mercy on me, a sinner."

The word “have mercy” is used in every Christian Church. In our own Church we repeat it many times during the liturgical services. The Greek word we find in the Gospel and in ancient liturgical use—*eleison*—is related to *elaion*, meaning the olive tree and its oil. When we look at the Old and New Testaments, we frequently encounter references to olive oil in various stories and parables.

We see the image of the olive branch in the Book of Genesis, in the account of the Flood, when Noah sent out the birds to see whether the earth was dry. When the dove returned with a small olive branch (cf. Gen. 8:11), it was a sign that the wrath of God had ceased and that He was granting humankind a new beginning. In the anointing of kings and priests in the Old Testament, oil was poured upon their heads as a sign that the grace of God descended and was poured out upon them (cf. Ps. 132:2), giving them new strength to carry out what lay beyond human capability—for a king is to stand at the boundary between human will and the will of God, leading his people toward knowing and fulfilling God’s will. Even more: to act “like God,” meaning to proclaim the divine commandments and carry out God’s judgments.

In the New Testament parable of the Good Samaritan, olive oil is poured out to lessen pain and to heal wounds (cf. Lk. 10:25–37).

Olive oil recalls the cessation of divine anger, conversion, and the transformation of a person; it recalls the peace God gives to those who have sinned against Him. It speaks of our healing, so that we may live and become what we are called to be. For the Lord knows that we are unable on our own to fulfill His will or to govern our sinful bodies. Therefore, He pours out His grace upon us (cf. Rom. 5:20). He gives us strength for what is impossible by human effort alone.

The words “mercy” and “have mercy” mean tenderness, compassion. But when we say, “Lord, have mercy” (*eleison* in Greek; “have mercy on us” in English), we are asking God not only to spare us from His wrath but also for His mercy and love toward us.

Returning to the words of the Jesus Prayer—“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner”—we see that the first part of the prayer clearly, concretely, and fully expresses the evangelical faith in Jesus Christ. The second part expresses the many dimensions of the richness of love that exists between God and His creation.

The Jesus Prayer helps us to focus quickly, at any time and under any circumstances. Indeed, in the writings of the Fathers we can find much about various physical aspects of this prayer—about breathing, attentiveness, and many other things. The Fathers left many technical methods that they developed. Many people have studied this subject and have always come to the same conclusion: one should not undertake these techniques without guidance from someone experienced in them.

However, the prayer itself is given to all of us. It is the repetition of the words without any physical techniques. A prayer intended to lead us to inner transformation. The Jesus Prayer, more than any other, is meant to place us in God’s presence, to make us aware that the Lord is here with us, for when we pray this prayer, no one and nothing else exists—only God. On the one hand, it is like any other prayer through which we honor God, yet it also helps us concentrate solely on Him and His presence.

I dare say that the Jesus Prayer is like our best friend—always near and always personal, despite the monotony of its repetition. In joy and in sorrow, when it becomes familiar to us, it fills us with strength and grace. It is the prayer in

which we may find the answer to our difficulties and problems, and also experience joy.

PRAYER AND SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE

More than once I have heard from various people the wish—or even the complaint—that we no longer have spiritual fathers or elders today. That there is no one to whom one could entrust oneself completely, no one who could guide a person along the right path to the Lord throughout one's entire life, helping to overcome the many difficulties that are always present, as well as to avoid the various temptations and snares of the devil.

In this matter, we must first of all always remember that the Lord is the One "who is everywhere present and fills all things." He is also the One who will never abandon us, "even if father and mother forsake us" (cf. Ps. 26:10). God is always with us, and we have no right—not even for a single moment—to think that we could ever be left on our own. He knows far better than we do all our true needs, necessities, and problems. And the Lord desires our salvation far more than we ourselves desire it. Therefore, He orders everything in our life solely for our sanctification and, ultimately, for our salvation. It is for this reason that He sends into our lives those people who have experience and can help us walk this path.

For it is through such an elder or spiritual father that God speaks to us. But an elder is not someone who stands between the disciple and God; rather, he stands at the side, pointing to the road by which one should walk toward the Lord. A spiritual father is, above all, one who has himself experienced the Father (hence his "fatherhood") and can therefore bear witness to others.

God can speak to us equally through anything. It may be a sermon, a confession, a book, or even some event. Anything. We know that when necessary, the Lord once spoke to a prophet through a donkey (cf. Num. 22:28). He can make use of anything—provided that we are ready to hear Him and attentive to what He wants to say to us. And above all, the Lord speaks to us through prayer.

Therefore, if we do not have a spiritual guide, we must pray even more fervently and confess to any priest whom we trust. At the same time, we must faithfully follow what the Holy Gospel teaches us, what the holy Fathers teach, listen to the preaching of the Church, and be attentive to what our conscience says. Nevertheless, we must also ask God to send us someone who will show us the way to Him—yet without anxiety or agitation, trusting in God and being certain that He will indeed give us what we ask, if it is truly necessary for us. If the Lord does not act, then no one else can help us. Let us remember that. Therefore, we must not be troubled if He does not presently send us a spiritual guide, for then He Himself assumes full responsibility for us and for our life.

We should thus live our ecclesial life peacefully, for the Lord has many instruments within the Church who are, in a sense, "elders and spiritual fathers" for us.

The Lord does not always require that we be guided by one and the same person continuously and for a long time. If we look at the lives of the saints, we see that many "were saved" through a single encounter with a person who spoke the word they needed ("Speak a word, Abba"). And on that word the person built his salvation. Or, even without meeting anyone, merely hearing or reading a line of the Gospel—such a word or sentence could so deeply affect them that it became the foundation of their entire life.

Furthermore, it is not so much that there are no spiritual fathers; rather, the problem is that we do not value the counsel we receive. If we look honestly at our lives, we will see that we often seek advice or solutions to some problem. We receive such advice from someone, but very often we carry it out only half-heartedly. Again, when we find ourselves in trouble and again find an answer telling us what we must do, we again fulfill it only superficially. For such people, spiritual guides are needed—especially those with great experience and patience. But I believe what is needed especially is great creativity and insight, so as to be able constantly to propose something new, something fresh—something we have not yet heard or known.

Yet the point is not to learn something new again and again, for we will never acquire knowledge that automatically makes us more experienced or more spiritual. What is essential is that we actually live according to what God has revealed to us or enabled us to know at some moment ("the word of life").

There is another point the Fathers mention, which we should not forget. If you do not have a guide whom the Lord has given you, through whom He would lead you, then be in the company of two or three like-minded people who share the same goal. Seek their counsel in all your needs and concerns. "For where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I in their midst" (cf. Mt. 18:20). He will not allow them to go astray but will instruct them by His Holy Spirit.

PRAYER IN DIFFICULT LIFE SITUATIONS

Elections are a topic that seems, at first glance, unrelated to prayer. Yet from time to time we face the question of electing a president, deputies of various levels, and mayors. Discussions, conflicts, and tension constantly increase.

From the perspective of God, if we consider this situation, the Lord already knows who will be the better president, deputy, or mayor. In God's perspective there are no questions—only answers to everything. Therefore, when we speak about elections, our task is to draw closer to God so that He may give us a clear understanding of whom to choose. When we are far from God, we do not know who would truly be best for us. And this question concerns not only elections but the entire path of our life as citizens. For our limited mind, there is no answer—but God has a solution for everything. Thus, there is a practical counsel for such a time.

Pray the rosary, the Jesus Prayer, the "Our Father," read a passage from the Holy Scripture, and spend some time in silence. Then ask: "O Almighty God, You know all that is best for us; grant me to know whom You have prepared for our country."

The Lord has an answer for us. When we stand before God—when we are, so to speak, "online" with Him—He will reveal what is truly good for us. But when we are far from God, we will not know the answer. Therefore, let us find this time for the Lord—for prayer and for silence—so that we may discern who is to govern our country.

END OF CHAPTER II